

ACCOUNT
OF
A MAN WHO LIVED TEN YEARS,
AFTER HAVING SWALLOWED
A NUMBER OF CLASP-KNIVES;
WITH
*A Description of the Appearances of the Body
after Death.*

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IN laying this extraordinary case before the Society, as affording a most striking illustration of the self-preserving powers of the stomach and intestines, I am aware that it has, in a great degree, lost the merit of novelty; for this unfortunate man died so far back as the year 1809, in Guy's hospital, where his case was noticed by many persons, and was soon afterwards alluded to in some of the Medical Journals of that period *. These anonymous and imperfect notices were not, however, calculated, any more than the simple recollection of the individuals who had witnessed the occurrence, to answer the purpose of a permanent

* See in particular the *London Medical Review*, Vol. XI, page 203.

or well authenticated record. Indeed, my late colleague Dr. Curry, under whose care the patient died in the hospital, feeling that the preservation of such a fact ought not to be trusted to mere tradition, collected, at the time, the necessary materials to draw up an account of the case, and present it to this, or some other learned society; but this having been deferred from time to time, and ultimately rendered impossible, by the death of that able physician, I thought it desirable to draw it up, before the particulars were lost or dispersed.

The principal source from which I derived my information, as to the early history of the case, is a narrative, written with great distinctness and simplicity, by the patient himself, and which, when compared with other authentic documents, establishes the facts in the most satisfactory manner*.

In the month of June 1799, John Cummings, an American sailor, about twenty-three years of age, being with his ship on the coast of France, and having gone on shore with some of his shipmates, about two miles from the town of Havre de Grace, he and his party directed their course towards a tent, which they saw in a field, with a crowd of people round it. Being told that a play was acting there, they entered, and found in the tent a

* The whole of this narrative, with all its peculiarities of expression and style, will be given in an Appendix. It was found in the patient's pocket after his decease.

mountebank, who was entertaining the audience by pretending to swallow clasp-knives. Having returned on board, and one of the party having related to the ship's company the story of the knives, Cummings, after drinking freely, boasted that he could swallow knives as well as the Frenchman. He was taken on his word and challenged to do it. Thus pressed, and though (as he candidly acknowledged in his narrative) "not particularly anxious to take the job in hand, he did not like to go against his word, and having a good supply of grog inwardly," he took his own pocket-knife, and on trying to swallow it "it slipped down his throat with great ease, and by the assistance of some drink, and the weight of the knife," it was conveyed into his stomach. The spectators, however, were not satisfied with one experiment, and asked the operator "whether he could swallow more?" his answer was, "all the knives on board the ship;" upon which, three knives were immediately produced, which were swallowed in the same way as the former; and "by this bold attempt of a drunken man," (to use his own expressions) "the company was well entertained for that night." The next morning he had a motion, which presented nothing extraordinary; and in the afternoon he had another, with which he passed one knife, which however was not the one that he had swallowed the first. The next day he passed two knives at once, one of which was the first, which he had missed the day before. The fourth never

came away, to his knowledge, and he never felt any inconvenience from it. After this great performance, he thought no more of swallowing knives for the space of six years.

In the month of March 1805, being then at Boston, in America, he was one day tempted, while drinking with a party of sailors, to boast of his former exploits, adding, that he was the same man still, and ready to repeat his performance ; upon which, a small knife was produced, which he instantly swallowed. In the course of that evening he swallowed five more. The next morning crowds of visitors came to see him ; and in the course of that day he was induced to swallow eight knives more, making in all fourteen.

This time, however, he paid dearly for his frolic ; for he was seized the next morning with constant vomiting, and pain at his stomach, which made it necessary to carry him to Charleston hospital, where, as he expresses it, “ betwixt that period and the 28th of the following month, he was safely delivered of his cargo.”

The next day he sailed for France, on board a brig, with which he parted there, and embarked on board another vessel* to return to America. But on his passage, the vessel, which was probably carrying on some illicit traffic, was taken by His Majesty's

* The “ Betty,” of Philadelphia.

ship the *Isis*, of fifty guns, and sent to St. John's, Newfoundland, where she was condemned, while he himself was pressed and sent to England on board the *Isis*. One day, while at Spithead, where the ship lay some time, having got drunk, and, as usual, renewed the topic of his former follies, he was once more challenged to repeat the experiment, and again complied, "disdaining," as he says, "to be worse than his word." This took place on the 4th of December 1805, and in the course of that night he swallowed five knives. On the next morning the ship's company having expressed a great desire to see him repeat the performance, he complied with his usual readiness, and "by the encouragement of the people, and the assistance of good grog," he swallowed that day, as he distinctly recollects, nine clasp-knives, some of which were very large; and he was afterwards assured, by the spectators, that he had swallowed four more, which, however, he declares he knew nothing about, being, no doubt, at this period of the business, too much intoxicated to have any recollection of what was passing. This, however, is the last performance we have to record; it made a total of at least thirty-five knives, swallowed at different times, and we shall see that it was this last attempt which ultimately put an end to his existence.

On the following day, 6th of December, feeling much indisposed, he applied to the surgeon of the ship, Dr. Lara, who by a strict enquiry, satisfied him-

self of the truth of the above statement; and, as the patient himself thankfully observes, administered some medicines, and paid great attention to his case, but no relief was obtained *. At last, about three months afterwards, having taken a quantity of oil, he felt the knives (as he expressed it) “dropping down his bowels;” after which, though he does not mention their being actually discharged, he became easier, and continued so till the 4th of June following (1806), when he vomited one side of the handle of a knife, which was recognized by one of the crew to whom it had belonged. In the month of November of the same year, he passed several fragments of knives, and some more in February 1807. In June of the same year, he was discharged from his ship as incurable; immediately after which, he came to London, where he became a patient of Dr. Babington, in Guy’s hospital. He was discharged after a few days, his story appearing altogether incredible, but was re-admitted by the same physician, in the month of August, his health during this period having evidently become much worse. It was probably at this time that the unfortunate sufferer wrote his narrative, which terminates at his second admission into the hospital.

* An interesting letter from Dr. Lara, was found among Dr. Curry’s papers, which supplies some of the particulars respecting the patient’s illness, while on board the *Isis*; and the close coincidence between Dr. Lara’s statement and the account of the patient himself, forms a chain of evidence of the most perfect and conclusive kind. Dr. Lara’s letter will be found at full length in the Appendix.

I find, however, by the hospital records, that, on the 28th of October he was discharged in an improved state; and he did not appear again at the hospital till September 1808, that is, after an interval of nearly a year since his former application. He now became a patient of Dr. Curry, under whose care he remained, gradually and miserably sinking under his sufferings, till March 1809, when he died, in a state of extreme emaciation.

OF the management of this case, while the patient was in Guy's hospital, I have little to observe. His statement being at first altogether disbelieved, he was considered as a hypochondriac, probably labouring under some chronic affection of the stomach and liver, and was treated accordingly. Subsequently, however, the consistency of his story, the intense pain he suffered at the region of his stomach, and a hardness which Dr. Babington thought he could feel in the region of the colon, induced his medical attendants to give some credit to his account of the origin of his complaint; and Dr. Babington having one day examined him, conjointly with Sir Astley Cooper, these gentlemen concluded, from a minute inquiry into all the circumstances of the case, and especially from the deep black colour of his alvine evacuations, that there really was an accumulation of ferruginous matter in his organs of digestion. And this was fully confirmed soon afterwards, by Mr. Lucas, one

of the surgeons of the hospital, who, by introducing his finger into the rectum, distinctly felt in it a portion of a knife, which appeared to lie across the intestine, but which he could not extract, on account of the intense pain which the patient expressed on his attempting to grasp it.

With a view to dissolve these bodies, or at least in hopes of succeeding in blunting their edges, dilute acids, first the nitric, and afterwards the sulphuric, combined with opium and mucilage, were prescribed, both by Dr. Babington and Dr. Curry. Various other palliatives were also occasionally administered; and that these remedies were attended with some temporary benefit, may be inferred from the long period during which the patient's life was preserved, notwithstanding the utterly hopeless nature of his situation.

On opening the body after death, various interesting appearances presented themselves *. Throughout the cavity of the abdomen, a blackish ferruginous tinge prevailed, which was also observable in the hepatic system. On examining the intestines, one of the blades, and one of the back springs, were actually found in them, both so situated that their expulsion from the body was obviously im-

* This dissection was performed by Mr. Travers, surgeon to St. Thomas's hospital, then demonstrator of Anatomy at Guy's hospital, under the inspection of Mr. Lucas, surgeon to the hospital, and in the presence of many other medical gentlemen.

possible. The latter of these (marked No. 17, in the annexed plate) about $4\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, had literally transfixed the colon opposite the left kidney, and projected into the cavity of the abdomen; while another was found stretching across the rectum, with one of its extremities actually fixed in the muscular parietes of the pelvis. It was observed that, although the knives had thus perforated the intestines, no fæces had escaped into the cavity of the abdomen, and that no active inflammation had taken place; in consequence, no doubt, of the perforation having been gradual, and of a slow and simultaneous process of ulceration having taken place from within, which had enabled the parts to adapt themselves so closely round the protruding instrument, as effectually to prevent all communication between the wounded intestine and the general cavity of the abdomen.

The stomach, viewed externally, bore evident marks of altered structure. It was not examined internally at this time, but was opened soon afterwards, in the presence of Sir Astley Cooper, and Mr. Smith, surgeon of the Bristol infirmary, who happened to be present at that moment, when a great many portions of blades, knife-springs, and handles, were found in it, and were carefully collected for the anatomical museum of Guy's hospital, in which they are now deposited. These fragments were between 30 and 40 in number, 13 or 14 of them being evidently the remains of

blades; some of which, as may be seen by the annexed plate, were remarkably corroded, and prodigiously reduced in size, while others were comparatively in a state of tolerable preservation*.

As to the stomach itself, it has also been preserved in the museum of Guy's hospital; and Sir Astley Cooper, who has again recently examined it, has favored me with the following particulars:

“The œsophagus at its lower part, and the upper orifice of the stomach, were thicker than natural. The left extremity of the stomach, where the spleen adheres to it, had its usual texture; but the right was exceedingly thickened. The rugæ, in the mucous membrane, were unusually prominent; and there were granulated projections from the edges of the rugæ. This membrane was still slightly coloured by the steel. The pylorus was natural, but the duodenum had a greater thickness than usual.”

From a comparison of these particulars with the history of the case, it would appear, that so long as the stomach was not injured in its action and texture, the passage of the knives was, in most instances, attended with no, or very little inconvenience. But from the frequent repetition of these

* All these having been arranged in a glass case, were laid before the Society, for inspection. The one marked No. 7, in the Plate, being made of cast-steel, appears to have undergone the least alteration.

experiments, together with the man's habits of intemperance, the stomach at last lost the power of transmitting to the intestines those bulky and unyielding bodies. They therefore now remained in that organ, where they produced the distressing symptoms of indigestion and pain which have been described; and the circumstance of the knives not wounding the intestines till the latter period, was probably owing to a similar cause, namely, that when the stomach was able to expel them quickly, they passed through the intestines, inclosed within their handles, and therefore comparatively harmless; while at a later period, the knives were detained in the stomach till the handles, which were mostly of horn, had been dissolved, or at least too much reduced to afford any protection against the metallic part.

Being present at the dissection of which I have just given an account, I had the opportunity of noticing a chemical fact, which I shall mention, as showing the power which iron possesses of impregnating the biliary secretions. Observing that the contents of the gall-bladder partook of the black tinge of the other abdominal viscera, I collected some of the bile, for the purpose of ascertaining whether, and in what proportion, it might contain iron. About 150 grs. of this bile (which was perfectly black, and possessed the usual alkaline properties) being subjected to evaporation, and the dry mass burnt in a platina crucible, with a little

wax, the incinerated residue weighed nearly five grs., and on presenting a magnet, ferruginous particles were immediately attracted by it. This residue being treated with muriatic acid and prussiate of potash, the quantity of prussian blue formed amounted (after being well dried) to 0.5 grs. The presence of a notable quantity of iron in this bile, was therefore clearly shown by this analysis; and that this quantity was much more considerable than it is under ordinary circumstances, was ascertained by a comparative experiment upon healthy human bile (obtained from a body in which that secretion had suffered no morbid change before death), 150 grs. of which, treated in a similar manner, yielded at most 0.2 grs. of prussiate of iron. This susceptibility of the bile, of receiving a ferruginous impregnation, from the presence of iron in the stomach, appears to me the more remarkable, as I tried in vain, a few years ago, to detect iron in the urine of persons whose digesting system was under the influence of that metal*.

* See a letter to Dr. Wollaston, printed in the Philosophical Transactions for 1811.

